

# A Life Line for Harriet

THE STORY OF A GIRL WHO WAS AFRAID THAT SHE WOULD  
NEVER BE MARRIED

By Margaret Busbee Shipp

**H**ARRIET had made her début when she was nineteen. She had been kept back, as her mother phrased it, until Jessie was married. Sadie and Jessie had been "out" together, and it was inadvisable for the third sister to be in evidence until the other two were married off.

When Harriet left school, it was agreeable to know that Dotty was six years younger, and so couldn't come treading on her heels. How the years had raced by, and how developed Dotty was now for her seventeen years!

Harriet's first two winters had been, to her, like a dream come true. Dances galore and partners in plenty—what more could a girl wish? It was her mother, with wise, experienced eyes, who saw that the partners were constantly changing, that everybody liked Harriet and nobody was paying her devoted attention—unless one counted Joe Hayes, who hardly counted at all. Joe was sawed off in stature, with a large mouth, and one eye smaller than the other, giving him the expression of an unfinished gargoyle.

The Nelson home was friendly and hospitable, and the young people of the town had formed the habit of dropping in, sure of warmth and welcome. An unusual touch was given to the family life by the fact that "dad," as all the girls' friends called him, was no submerged tenth. He was a genial, entertaining host and a shark at bridge.

Without a care passed the winter when Harriet was nineteen and the winter when she was twenty. The next two seasons might have been called the Arthur Burton period. Burton came to Yarborough to live, met Harriet, and took an immediate liking to her. A few weeks later—he had seen her frequently in the meantime—he said in his abrupt fashion:

"Look here, I want to lay all the cards on the table. I'm engaged to be married to a girl at home, but the engagement isn't to be announced until she finishes college, and she still has two years. If you and I can be good pals—why, it will make all the difference in my life here; but I don't want to take up too much of your time."

"That's all right," promised Harriet easily. "I know how to be a good friend better than anything else. It's my long suit. I won't tell a soul about your engagement, and I appreciate your telling me." She looked at him with her happy blue eyes, full of good humor and the joy of living. "You know I'm not the sort of girl who goes in for quiet corners and love-making and petting. I like crowds, and fun, and a lot of noise—I just *do*!"

Harriet said it lightly. The realization of its absolute truth came to her gradually. Men didn't make love to her, except Joe now and then. She was too big. Perhaps the majority of men found five feet nine rather too much for a wife.

Harriet was straight as a pine sapling,

with a good fresh skin, laughing eyes, and a vibrant voice which was sometimes too loud. She brimmed with vitality, and there was always a crowd around her.

Burton, tall, handsome in a dark, saturnine way, found her so stimulating as a companion that his good resolutions not to engross her vanished into thin air. They went everywhere together. He was a distinguished-looking cavalier, particular about sending the right flowers, and in seeing to it that the girl whom he signaled for his favors should receive all the attention due her.

"Why should I take some girl to a dance who bores me to extinction, merely because she previously bored me by inviting me to dinner?" he would demand petulantly. "Why should you go with Hayes, whose head barely reaches to your chin, when your step and mine suit to perfection, and dancing together is a joy?"

At the end of Burton's second winter in Yarborough, when all the town was tranquilly expecting the announcement of their engagement, he came to Harriet's one evening, stirred out of his usual nonchalance.

"I'm in luck, I suppose," he began sullenly. "I've been offered a better salary in my home town. Leila will like that. You know she graduates in June."

There was no response. With hands which were not quite steady, Harriet was pulling the petals from a rose—Harriet, who liked flowers.

"It will seem strange not to see you. We—we have been together so much. We have been such pals." His voice had a queer note, almost as if he were angry. "I had rather never to have known you than to find it so hard to tell you good-by. It's like a wrench—like being uprooted." He broke off abruptly. "Good-by. It's the last time. Kiss me once, Hallie, will you?"

She lifted her face to his. On the train he recalled that she had not spoken at all.

When she was alone again, she spoke aloud and saw clearly—and to see clearly was what saved her.

"He was thinking only of himself! He has thought of himself all along! He didn't even realize how lonely I would be without him!"

When Burton married, Yarborough voiced the unanimous opinion that he had "consoled himself pretty soon." Of course, everybody knew that when Harriet had

rejected him, in the spring, he had left town in a huff, without saying good-by to his friends.

## II

JESSIE had a cottage on the coast that summer, and Harriet spent three months with her—a lazy summer out of doors, playing with Jessie's bewitching babies. Then home in the autumn—the same home, but amazingly different.

Dotty seemed to have sprung up overnight. She had enjoyed the full run of the house during vacation, and now it was her friends who were everywhere—the Eel's Knees, as they delighted to call themselves. Harriet's set seemed to have dissolved by some mysterious alchemy. The married ones belonged to the younger married set, and those who were left were either engaged or had gone to work.

Harriet was to be a bridesmaid at Susie Neal's wedding, and maid of honor at Meg Dalton's. Dotty was sent off to school—a tearful and protesting Dotty, who begged to stay at home and go as a day scholar to the Gilbert School for Girls, which in her mother's day had been the Young Ladies' Select Seminary.

After her youngest daughter was dispatched, Mrs. Nelson took up the matter with Harriet.

"Dotty will be eighteen next fall, and I don't see how I can insist on her going back to school. Ed Canfield seems very much in earnest. He's eight years older than Dot, and he's begging her to promise to marry him. He was at the station to see her off, and he brought her a huge corsage bouquet of orchids. It was much too old for Dotty—that's why it pleased her so."

"Ed Canfield!" said Harriet slowly. "Dot's so pretty, mother!"

Mrs. Nelson suddenly kissed her, understanding the generosity of Harriet's unspoken thought. She must put no stumbling block in Dot's path. The other two girls had married well, but Ed Canfield was the son of Yarborough's wealthiest citizen, and an attractive fellow as well.

Harriet could not sit around a home swarming with the Eel's Knees, and with Dotty's probable engagement making her own lack of success the more noticeable. For the first time in her happy, heedless days she faced herself as a social failure.

"Mother!" she cried, bewildered "Why, I'm going to be an old maid!"

"Nonsense, dear," soothed her mother. "There's from now until June before Dot comes home for good; and Joe so perfectly devoted to you—" At the aghast look on Harriet's face she continued smoothly: "And who knows what nice man you may happen to meet, child? *Prince Charming* may be around the next corner!"

"If he is," said Harriet very slowly, very thoughtfully, her mind glancing backward over the past four years, "he'll dance with me, he'll play tennis with me, he'll take me out in his car, he'll tell me I'm the best pal a fellow ever had, especially when he's blue; and then, after a while, he'll come in beaming to tell me he's in love with Meg or Clare—oh, any of the girls, but it won't be me!"

"There's Joe." This time her mother's voice had the tender defiance of the days when she used to bind up a cut finger with the assurance, "There, there! Nothing shall hurt mother's baby girl!" There was a shade of reproof, too, in Mrs. Nelson's tone. "Joe has never looked at any one but you in his life. You shouldn't talk as if nobody cared for you when a fine, honorable man like Joe has been in love with you ever since you were a schoolgirl."

"Imagine Joe by Ed Canfield!"

"I can imagine him very well," her mother replied steadily. "Of course, Ed has more money and better looks, but a girl doesn't marry just the present generation. Those who were behind a man go into his inheritance, and into his children's inheritance. I don't suppose there's a young man in Yarborough with as fine an ancestry as Joe's—a long line of good men, holding high positions of trust in the State, and of dignified gentlewomen. Joe is better born than Ed, and we both know it."

"I'll never marry a one-eyed runt like Joe as long as I live!" declared Harriet hotly. "Of course, I'm awfully fond of him in a way. He was so understanding about—about Arthur Burton."

Harriet did not realize that nothing had added so much to her desirability in Joe's eyes as the preference shown her by a handsome, sophisticated man like Burton.

"Mother, what shall I do next winter?" Harriet asked slowly.

"I've been thinking a great deal about that, daughter. If we're to give Dotty the same pleasures you girls had, it would be a big help to dad if you could be independent for a year. Would you like to stay

with your Aunt Mattie at Warrenton, and teach domestic science in the high school? Her husband is on the school board, and you do get along so wonderfully with children. But there's time enough to think about that. Trot along, now, darling, and bring me your cerise frock. It's going to be hard to fix spiral ruffles after such a long period of chemise frocks."

Harriet wore the finished gown to the rehearsal of Meg's wedding, to which she went with Joe.

"Did you know that Meg had arranged for us to wait on her together, and I balked?" asked Joe. "'Once to the altar, never again.' I'm not superstitious, but I'll take no chance against the one thing I want most in the world!"

It swept over Harriet that for her own sake, as well as Joe's, she must settle matters finally. She slipped her hand through his arm, as if the friendly contact might soften the words:

"That can never be, Joe. Please always be my very best friend, because that's all I can be to you—*ever*."

She could not see his face in the darkness. She could only hear the strained note in his voice:

"Ever since I was a man I've had that one clear picture in my mind—a home, you in it, lots of jolly flowers in the yard, and maybe—"

He broke off, and presently spoke again in his matter-of-fact way:

"Father wants me to go to Buenos Aires early next month. He has a cousin out there who seems to be quite influential, and who has written for me to come. Mother thinks it will do me good to get out of the rut of office work and see a little of the world. I hadn't decided—until now."

"Buenos Aires!" echoed Harriet dismally. "Why, Joe, that's almost at the bottom end of South America! It's on the other side of the equator! I never even heard of anybody who went to Buenos Aires."

But go he did, on the next steamer. His friends gave him a farewell dinner and trooped to the train to say good-by. Perhaps Joe himself was surprised to realize how many friends he had.

### III

THE immediate effect of Joe's departure, where Harriet was concerned, was that she had no escort for the next dance. It was

the first time that had happened since her debut more than four years before.

Then Mrs. Nelson took a quiet but capable hand in affairs. She was not the obvious "managing mother." She provided for her girls the background of a hospitable home and an unfailing welcome, and let things take their course. It had been like a well oiled machine which runs as easily as a motor coasts down hill. Now there was method in the choice of guests at her famous Sunday night suppers and jolly small dinners. Harriet was well aware that it was through her mother's unflagging interest and clever aid that her fifth winter went by, and people were still talking of her popularity and saying how well she held her own against the younger set.

Sometimes the praise rankled, as when a married woman remarked to her:

"I said the other night at the theater that you are the only girl in town who is always invited to everything that comes."

"Not a very exciting suitor," laughed Harriet. "It was Judge Barnard, a friend of dad's, and deaf as a post, but I've always been fond of him."

"His big car seems to be at your disposal," teased the other; "and he's a widower."

Harriet felt suddenly sick. Judge Barnard, sixty-one years old! What did it matter to her whether he had two wives under the sod or one in the flesh?

One March morning she met Joe's mother on the street—a woman whom she had always admired.

"Good morning, Harriet. What do you think of Joe's offer?" Mrs. Hayes asked with characteristic directness.

"I—I haven't heard about it," Harriet stammered.

It suddenly occurred to her that there had been a longer lapse than usual between Joe's letters.

"Our cousin wishes him to stay there. He has taken a great fancy to Joe, and made him an excellent offer to go into his office. Of course, he always has the place with his father open to him, and now that we are growing elderly the Argentine seems a long way to one's only son; but, like all mothers, I want him to choose what is best for his advancement and happiness."

Harriet walked home in a daze. She found Joe's last letter and reread it. There was not a word of love in it. It might have been written to a maiden aunt.

One paragraph stood out in scorching letters:

They say the Chileans are the prettiest women in South America, but they must be peaches if they can beat some of the girls I met at that dance—the real Spanish type, eyes as big as brown velvet moons.

Harriet had laughed over that when she read it for the first time, and had forgotten it. Now it swept over her, pitiless as a tidal wave. Joe was going to stay away forever. He was going to marry a girl from Argentina or Chile—oh, it didn't matter if she were a Patagonian!

She, Harriet Nelson, was never to marry at all. She faced the inexorable, inescapable fact.

She was made for domesticity. She wanted to go into her own, own kitchen and make cakes and put up marmalade. She knew the very pattern of kitchen cupboard she would choose. Of course, other girls went to work and were satisfied in it, but she knew she would abominate an office or teaching school. The very thought of it choked her, terrified her. She liked a home, and fussing around the pantry, and embroidering table linen, and transplanting seedlings, and bathing babies.

Never to develop her own ideas in anything, from a vegetable garden to the furniture of a sun porch! Never to have one's own baby, and to keep it as sweet and fresh as a little warm rose! That had been in Joe's dreams, too. She remembered how his voice had trembled as he broke off:

"And maybe—"

Her father had given her a little money, the week before, for her birthday gift. She went straight to the telegraph office and spent her entire capital on a cable to Buenos Aires.

Please come home, Joe. I miss you.

HALLIE.

#### IV

THERE was no answer. Joe's guardian angel must have been at his elbow, cautioning him not to cable. He caught the first available steamer, instead, but for weeks Harriet had lived in wretched uncertainty. The cable had never reached him, or it had reached him and he thought it kinder to take no notice of it, being infatuated with some designing South American girl!

When he appeared one morning, directly from the train, he found Harriet alone in

the library. She had on a pink gingham morning frock, which made her look younger and brought out the wholesome color of her skin and the blueness of her eyes. She gave a half articulate sob when she saw who it was, and went straight into Joe's open arms.

"Oh, honey," he said, "I'm so tired of black-eyed girls! Just let me look at you!"

She called that tremendous impulse of relief and joy at seeing him "falling in love," and she honestly believed it. It never occurred to her that she felt toward Joe as the drowning might feel to a rope.

Events followed in their well-known order. The engagement was announced at a delightful luncheon. There ensued a round of entertaining for the bride elect, and the wedding was in the last week in June, with an ecstatic Dotty as maid of honor. Everybody said that it was an ideal match and they had always expected it.

In the account of the wedding the morning paper spoke of Harriet as "Yarbor-

ough's acknowledged belle," and the groom thrilled with pride at having won her over all competitors. Yarborough people spoke of the massive silver pitcher which Judge Barnard sent as "most magnanimous under the circumstances." Even dignified Mrs. Hayes had a sense of gratification that the distinguished jurist was the latest feather ascribed to Harriet's cap.

Mrs. Nelson interpreted Harriet's fears during the winter as "the time when she was so nervous and low-spirited because Joe was away." Harriet, who was not a thinker, accepted her mother's theory. It was unimportant, anyhow, for anybody can find new reasons for things, but china lasts; and the really important matter was the dinner set that Joe and herself must choose.

Never for them the crystalline air of the high hills; but neither of them would ever know that the heights were there, being busily occupied with their days in the pleasant valley country, where one finds a denser population and perhaps a better chance of "living happy ever after."

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